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In a state where the practice of pay-to-play in politics has been pervasive, the news that two Illinois lawmakers are teaming up on ethics reforms is welcome.

U.S. Sen. Mark Kirk, a Republican, and U.S. Rep. Mike Quigley, a Northwest Side Democrat, announced Monday they are pushing two ethics measures.

One bill would allow Illinois to ban those who hold or bid on large transportation contracts from giving campaign contributions to statewide officeholders who have influence over those contracts. It closes a loophole on a ban that already applies to all other large state contracts.

The Illinois Legislature enacted the ban on donations in 2008, but created the loophole for transportation contracts after the Federal Highway Administration threatened to withhold federal funding because Illinois' law was interfering with its bidding process.

That has left Illinois with an illogical pay-to-play law that exempts some of the biggest players, said Cindi Canary, executive director of the Illinois Campaign for Political Reform.

"In purchasing pencils, you can't do this, but in a major road contract you can," Canary said.

The other ethics measure, which may be introduced as early as today, would respond to a 2010 U.S. Supreme Court ruling that limits the ability of prosecutors to criminally charge public officials and executives with a failure to deliver "honest services."

Citing vagueness in the law, which was used in the trials of former Gov. George Ryan and former Sun-Times owner Conrad Black, the court ruled that it could apply only in cases of actual alleged bribes or kickbacks.

The measure backed by Kirk and Quigley would restore other definitions of theft of honest services, such as financial self-dealing. It would prohibit an officeholder, the officeholder's spouse and the officeholder's private business from benefitting financially from the officeholder's elected office.

Critics of the original law argued it could be used by prosecutors to criminalize normal political behavior.

When introduced, we trust the new measure will be specific and avoid that pitfall.